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THE HOPE OF IMMORTALITY

Prepared for

The General Assembly's Commission
on the War
and the Spiritual Life of the Church

BY

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ERRATA

Page 7—Line 15 should read “table-rappings.”

“ 8—Line 3 should read “the assurance of immortality.”

“ 9—Line 22. Quotation beginning on line 21 should end with “vast.”

The Hope of Immortality

Issued by the Assembly's Commission on the War.

Some time ago, in the days before the war, a German theologian prophesied that the hope of immortality would count for less and less in our religion, and would ultimately disappear. And it must be admitted that this forecast seemed to be in accord with the general trend of thought and interest. It is true that no ground of reason on which men have been wont to base this hope has been rendered untenable, and that no new fact has been discovered that discredits it; the contrary, as will presently be shown, is the case. It is true also, that the results of the most recent scholarly study of the Scriptures point entirely in the opposite direction. Especially is it the case that a more searching and realistic investigation of the Gospels than they had been before subjected to, shows that the eschatological element in the Life and Teaching of Jesus is not anything secondary, but is fundamental and pervasive to an extent which had not been apprehended. So much so, that a veteran and prince among New Testament scholars, Dr. Sanday, is found acknowledging that he had not "until lately adequately realized how far the centre of gravity of our Lord's ministry and mission lay beyond the grave." Whether the results of this closer historical interpretation will in course of time filter down into popular thought, and if they do, in what form and with what effect, remains a question. Meantime it is beyond question that for at least a generation the hope of immortality has been counting for less and less in our religious life. The majority of people, no doubt, retain the traditional belief in a future state of existence; but it does not grip, it scarcely interests them; at most it ministers a vague consolation in time of bereavement. And the same thing has come to be true of those for whom religion is more vital, and of the Church as a whole. Before the outbreak of the war sermons whose keynote was the life everlasting were comparatively seldom heard from our pulpits, and there was no more neglected section of the hymn book than that on the Last Things.

Nor is it difficult to account for this. A prolonged period of peace and prosperity, when progress in every department of activity seems to be constant and almost automatic, and the near horizon is bright with dazzling possibilities, is not one in which the vision of eternity is apt to grow most vivid.

"Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years" tends to become the utterance, not of a besotted individual, but of the collective mind. Another and more creditable cause is the new emphasis which in this generation is laid upon the social aspects and applications of Christianity. Human progress never succeeds in keeping to the *via media*; its advance is always by zigzags. We seem incapable of doing justice to one interest without doing injustice to another. So it is now. There was a time when the conception of the Christian salvation was far too exclusively that of dying in the peace of believing and going to Heaven. But we have changed all that. Social reform rather than the "salvation of souls" is our watchword; and the most earnest religion we have is more intent on getting things put right here and now than on any future Kingdom of Heaven. And how much, how very much, there is that is wholesome, how much to be thankful for, in this reaction from an excessive individualism and other-worldliness!

Yet, if we will listen to the teaching of history we shall be aware of the peril that attends all such reactions. We shall learn that in the Body of Truth no member can suffer neglect without injury to the rest; and shall take warning that we can never remedy one defect by creating another. And the question this paper is intended in the first place to raise is, whether apart from the conviction of personal immortality—if we believe that this present state of existence contains all there is, *not only for ourselves but for all men*—it is possible to possess any ideal for the individual life, or any hope for human society, that can be called stimulating and satisfying.

We ungrudgingly admit—or, rather, gladly assert—that there are men who with no hope beyond the grave live noble, self-denying lives, who show an enthusiastic interest in all that concerns the welfare of their fellow-men, who are willing to spend and be spent, to labor and suffer, and even die, (as many have done in the present war) merely that those who come after them may find the world a better place. Nor is it to be thought that any of us must live ignobly, although we believed that life would end next week. Right is always right, and wrong unalterably wrong; and in that faith, even if all things human end in death, we should have to live as best we might. But that "best" would not be well. For we are saved by hope. We are so made that we cannot act in the present and for the present only. To say that we are rational beings means that we act with an outlook upon some future near or far. We sow in hope that we shall reap, or that others will reap. The permanence of any fact, either in itself or in its consequences, is an essential factor of value; and while moral ideals have an absolute value—the value of

right depending on nothing else than its rightness—yet an ideal to be a fact at all, must have *being*. And the ideal has being only in minds; and if all the minds whose ideal it is cease to exist, not only its existence but every trace and memory of its existence must be obliterated. We may say that to do right is at any rate eternally right; that, whatever happens, it will always be a fact that we made the right choice, and that this fact will enter somehow as a component into the general sum of human things; but if that general sum is finally nothing, what value remains to its components? We may say that the past is never dead but lives still in the present and will live on in the future; but if a time shall come when for humanity there is no present and no future, but only a past that is absolutely gone, which there is nothing to recall and no one to remember, can it be said that anything done in it is a fact of imperishable value? It must be admitted at any rate that it makes practically a vast difference whether one is convinced that the right choice he makes, it may be in the face of sore temptation, is destined to bear permanent fruit in his own and in other lives, or that all fidelity, all striving after purity and goodness, will in the end leave no trace anywhere. The truth is that we are saved by hope; that all men who live nobly and fight the good fight do so because they believe that their action will bear fruit in some future far or near. They have thought out matters so far, and it is only so long as we do not think them out to the end that we can ignore the hope of personal immortality.

For what is the substitute which a popular school of modern thought offers for this? It is the contribution each of us can make to the future progress of the race, that we may live on in other lives made better by the fact that we have lived. If we must feed our minds on a future, it is far better to set our hearts on doing what we can in our brief day to make life better for those who are to come after us, than to hanker after the continuance of our own petty personal existence. We ought to remember, as it is often said, that though God buries the workman, He carries on the work, and that it is the work, not the tools, that is the important thing. But this is merely to evade the ultimate issue. One would like to know how God is going to carry on the work when He has buried all the workmen; and, moreover, what the "work" is He is going to carry on (believing with St. Paul that "we are His workmanship"). Those who rest in this position assume the immortality of man, though not of men. They contemplate the permanence of the human race. But how, one would again like to know, without individual immortality can there be an immortality of the race? Modern science dispels any such dream. "Till a period within

the memory of men now living it was possible to credit terrestrial life with an infinite future, wherein there was room for an infinite approach to an unpictured perfection. It could always be hoped that human efforts would leave behind them some enduring traces which, however slowly, might accumulate without end. But hopes like these are possible no more. All terrestrial life is in revolt against the second law of thermodynamics (the degradation of energy); but, to it, in the end, must all terrestrial life succumb." (A. J. Balfour, *Theism and Humanism*, pp. 90-92.) If the physical history of this planet is allowed to run out its natural course, there will one day be a last man; and if there is no life beyond, with his expiring breath humanity will be extinct, all its history of mingled good and evil, its sins and heroisms, its aspirations and struggles, have gone down into the grave of everlasting nonentity. It seems a fine thing to say: What matters if I pass? let me think of others. But these other lives have become petty and insignificant as your own. Try as you will to obtain firm footing, all is sinking sand. Human griefs and human happiness, human right and human wrong, all are ephemeral as the itching of your eyebrow. There is no escape from the ultimate issue. If the life of the individual is only "a momentary taste of being, from the well amid the waste," then all human history is but the "phantom caravan" which at last reaches "the nothing it set out from." In Plato's phrase, all things are spent on death. Could any creed be more paralyzing, if its implications were realized? It is, because they do not think matters out to the end that those who deny the hope of immortality, can endure the denial.*

But the tragic events of the times in which we live are compelling us so to think, and to-day the Hope of the Gospel is nearer and dearer to multitudes than ever before. Not that the war with its colossal sacrifice of human personality in any way strengthens the case for immortality; but it brings the alternative home to us with a poignant intensity. When men, obeying the call of duty, are cut down in thick swathes long ere the scythe of time had any claim upon them, their powers still in the green blade, their dreams and ambitions unrealized, their work apparently undone, if this were the end, then what is man? His beauty is consumed like the moth; his days are like unto vanity. We feel the tragic incompleteness of these young lives; and then we feel the incomplete-

*There are exceptions to this statement, but they are of such a kind as only to emphasize its general truth. One who has honestly faced "the final issue" writes: "Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation hereafter be built." (Hon. Bertrand Russell, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 60).

ness of all human life, feel that it cannot be a circle closing us in, it must be a path leading elsewhere. It is so manifestly a fragment, a beginning, a sowing-time of which the full harvest must be hereafter.

To reach an assurance so greatly to be desired men have followed various paths. There is the path of spiritualism, of actual communications from the departed, demonstrating to the senses the fact of their survival beyond death. But without affirming or denying or committing oneself to any opinion about the reality of such manifestations, one may express the conviction that, while they may in certain cases confirm belief in personal immortality, they can never originate it. It is safe to assert that no one has ever come really to believe in a future life because he has seen a ghost or heard mysterious table-wrappings. It is the belief that makes these communications from the unseen credible, if they are credible, not *vice versa*.

There is the path of philosophical speculation, the path of Plato and his successors, who have reasoned, and perhaps reasoned well, that the soul is by its very nature indestructible. But the metaphysical proof will never lead, will never at any rate lead the ordinary man very far.

We get further, perhaps, by the path of simple instinct. There is something in most of us that naturally revolts against the "cold obstruction of the tomb." Even a seasoned agnostic like Huxley acknowledges "I do not relish the thought that in 1900 I shall have ceased to be, as completely as in 1800 I had not begun to be." But the instinct is not universal; and in many of those who do possess it, its potency is strangely variable. Nor does it always point forward to a personal immortality; with a large section of the human race it takes the form of a longing for absorption, the merging of all self-identity, in the unconscious depths of Eternal Being. But granting the existence and power of the instinct, the question arises whether it is to be trusted; and that is part of a larger question. Is life on a rational basis? Does the Power that has made us what we are, whatever that Power is, mean something by it, and is it to be trusted to finish what it has begun? Is there in human life and history a purpose that is marching on, and is that purpose wise and righteous and good? Can we be assured that whatever would be most blessed and good, were it true, must therefore ultimately be true? These questions resolve themselves into one question—Is there a God? Ordering and pervading all things, is there the will of a rational, righteous and loving God?

Wherever the most vivid, operative, fruitful faith in personal immortality has been reached, it has been reached by the path of religious faith and held with the certainty of religious

experience. The most striking illustration of this fact, that faith in God, a God who is almighty and good, holds within it the assurance of immortality (even if only in the germ), is found in the religion of the Old Testament. The gropings and strugglings by which Hebrew faith advanced from the dreary belief in the ghost-life of Sheol to the exultant certainty, "He shall swallow up Death in victory" is the most impressive picture in the spiritual history of mankind of the necessity the human soul is under, in its highest and best moments, to believe that the present world does not furnish a satisfying ideal of human life, nor fulfil the purpose of one who can be fully trusted and adored as God. At first Israel had scarcely any ideas about the future, and those it had it shrank from in horror. But Israel had God, and that was everything. Its faith in God was greater and richer than it knew (as ours, too, may be greater and richer than we know), and among its stored-up treasures, which it needed centuries of the teaching of experience and the guidance of the Spirit to bring forth, was the hope of immortality. "Like Bunyan's pilgrim, the faith of Israel unconsciously carried the key of Promise in its bosom even when it was in the dungeons of Giant Despair."

And so it is still. If the great hope is to be more than a theological dictum or a comatose religious tradition, if it is to be a truth that is quick and powerful, touching experience at many vital points, influencing the whole outlook upon life, not an unrealized asset but a true soul-possession, it is still along this same path of faith and experience that it must be won. The hope of personal immortality stands or falls with faith in a personal God, and the realization of what that implies.

To believe in God is to believe in the *rationality* of things. And, let it be said once more, if life leads only to death, and the whole stream of human history, carrying in it the life-blood of all the generations, vanishes at last in the abyss of final nothingness, it is most like an idiot's tale, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But this pessimistic conclusion we cannot seriously entertain. We cannot soberly believe that we ourselves are a product of irrationality, and that this world in which we live is the result of accident. There is too much good in it for that, too much wisdom, beauty and goodness, too much happiness and love. But if we are sure that this is God's world, that it has emanated from a Being who is wise, and just and good, we must be equally sure that it is not God's best world—there is too much evil in it for that, too much that is imperfect, discordant, disappointing.

When we contemplate our own nature we find that we are made with capacities to which the present life never has been

and never can be adequate. Such is our capacity for *happiness*. To the most fortunate in circumstances, to the most fervent in piety, there come dreams of a happiness beyond anything that has been or ever will be experienced in this life. There is in us a capacity for *truth* which points beyond the limits of our present state. The quest for truth has been laid upon us, we know not how; and the further we advance in this quest the further off does the goal appear. Those who know most know best that here they have but touched the fringes of knowledge; and there is in us all an instinct which rises up to welcome the assurance that many things we know not now, we shall know hereafter. Deeper still, there is in us an inextinguishable capacity for *goodness*. If we know that we are capable of being far happier and wiser, we are still more conscious that we are capable of being far better than we are or are ever likely to be in this life; for, again, it is those who have advanced furthest in the pursuit of goodness who also see the greatest distances still to be traversed, and to the very end are forgetting the things behind and reaching forth to those that are before. There is in us a capacity for *service* which this life never exhausts; "The petty done, the undone vast, is still the cry of our struggling, aspiring humanity; and it is not easily conceivable that the vast powers for service personalized in a Paul, a Luther or a Lincoln are forever dissipated because a heart ceases to beat." There is a content in such personalities that is never fully expressed in their work. If life is on a rational basis the words, "Faithful in a few things," demand the sequel, "be thou lord over many things." And *love* stretches out both hands across the gulf of death. It revolts against the suggestion that all we have learned and suffered and meant for others, and all that others have learned and suffered and meant for us, is suddenly to be ended by the guillotine of death. To know that every hour that binds us more closely to each other, that makes us more fit to love and be loved, is only a step towards love's extinction, would rob us of any belief that the scheme of things in which our lives are set is to be trusted. To suppose that we are endowed with such capacities for happiness, for goodness and knowledge and service and love, and that when these capacities have been partially developed and we have learned a little how to live and have acquired some fitness for a place in God's universe—to suppose that just then we die and there is an end of us, is to suppose that God, if there is a God, takes the rough ore out of the mine, smelts it and changes it into fine steel, forges it into weapons for His use, tempers and polishes them, and then one day, in His caprice, breaks them in pieces and scatters their fragments to the void. "What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to

the pit?" The Psalmist's question goes to the root of the matter. To believe in God is to trust the rationality of life, and to trust the rationality of life is to believe in the life to come. When the death of a British officer, killed in action, was announced to a brother-officer who had been long his friend: "——— dead!" he exclaimed, "it'll take more than that to stop him. He'll carry on." It will take more than that to stop the career of any faithful life. We shall have the "glory of going on."

And to believe in God is to believe that there is an ultimate righteousness in things, that there is a moral order, a conscience in the universe, which distinguishes between right and wrong, and reacts upon the right-doer and the wrong-doer, according to their character. It is said by critics of the doctrine of personal immortality that the important thing is, not that we should survive, but that the things we care for shall survive, that these are valued in the universe on the whole as they are by us. But one of the things we thus care for is justice. A universe without justice would be an irrational universe; a radically unjust universe would be an infinite crime. We have a deep conviction that the ground-law of the universe *ought to be* such as will vindicate the right and everyone who is faithful to it; and by equal necessity redress the wrong and meet the arrogant and impenitent wrongdoer with the full force of its antagonism. But certainly this conviction is never fully justified in the present world. If it is true, as doubtless it is, that "history has a nemesis for every crime," in probably a majority of cases, it is not upon the perpetrator of the crime that its nemesis falls. If it is true that "the history of the world is the judgment of the world," it is a text on which it is often possible to preach that "might is right" as plausibly as that "right is might." The moral order demands another stage than that of this world for its full development. If Christ and Herod, Paul and Nero; if the criminals who have brought this cataclysm of war upon the world—if they and their helpless victims and their heroic resisters drop through the trap-door of death into the same unawakening sleep, if any man can shuffle out of the consequences of his deeds simply by dying, as all men must, existence is built on no principle of righteousness. The sufferings of innocence, the frequent impunity of wrong, callous selfishness flourishing, love trampled upon and crucified—Dives eating the fat and drinking the sweet, Lazarus rotting at his gate—these are facts of this life, and if the Power who conducts the world is to be called righteous, there must be other facts beyond. The criticism, that this belief in the ultimate righteousness of things means on the one hand a desire to be paid for doing our duty, and on the

other hand a thirst for vengeance, is merely unintelligent. To say that men are responsible if it means anything, means that they must somehow, somewhere, somewhen respond. There must come a time when in the light of truth the hidden shall be made open, and the open revealed in its true colors, and all falsehood and self-deception wither away. This is as necessary for the wrong-doer as for the righteous; and without it life would, morally, lead to no conclusion at all.

But for those who accept the revelation of God in Christ, there is yet firmer ground. To believe in God is to believe not only in rationality and righteousness, it is to believe in a perfect and eternal Love at the heart of life. It is to believe in a love that is more than benevolence, a love that sets its desire upon each of us by himself and for himself, that is afflicted in our afflictions, wronged in our wrongs, wounded and grieved by our sins, that has gone to the Cross for us and sought us through the gates of Death and Hell. We are not ripples on the surface of an oceanic Absolute. We are not tools of a Great Artificer to be used until blunted and worn out, then flung aside. We are not God's workmen whom He may calmly bury, relay after relay, provided that the work goes on. We are His children holding each a place in His love which no substitute can ever occupy, to whom He has bound Himself with ties which not even sin, much less time, can sever. If we believe in God by Jesus Christ, if to our souls the Love of God which is in Him shines in its own light as the Supreme Reality, we are on the surest foundation as regards the life to come. We need no spiritualistic manifestations, no far-fetched metaphysical reasonings. In Christ we have found God, a God whom frail, mortal and sinful as we are, we can trust, trust for ourselves, for those whom we love and for all men; trust for to-day and for to-morrow, for the great step into the unseen and for what lies beyond it, knowing that whatever unimaginable changes may be in store for mortals there, all of blessed and good each is capable of receiving He will ever bestow.